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LOST ORDER AND LOST OPPORTUNITY --
ANTIETAM IN RETROSPECT

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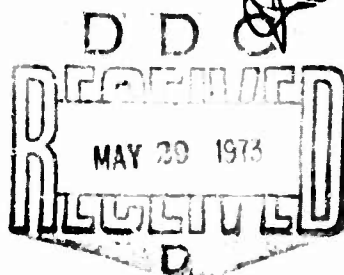
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(Essay)

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by

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ABSTRACT

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The basic problem is to determine the impact of the loss of Lee's Special Order 191 on the outcome of the Antietam Campaign in September 1862. Research was conducted to determine the actual disposition and vulnerability of Lee's army on the day the order was lost and delivered to General McClellan. Special attention was given to a determination of what the Union commander actually knew on that same day, and on the condition and disposition of his forces for future action. It was concluded that the loss of his order was instrumental in depriving Lee of any possibility of surprise and was a direct cause of his eventual defeat at Antietam, in the strategic sense. In spite of himself, McClellan did move fast enough to destroy Lee's plan of campaign, but slow enough to forego the tremendous opportunity afforded for the destruction of Lee's army.

LOST ORDER AND LOST OPPORTUNITY - ANTIETAM IN RETROSPECT

The gunfire of the Battle of Chantilly sputtered out and finally died away with the darkness of 1 September 1862. It heralded the close of the Second Bull Run Campaign. It found the Federal Army defeated, despondent and disorganized, drifting and straggling back to the protection of the defenses of Washington.

Lee, faced with a decision as to his next course of action,

decided to cross the Potomac east of the Blue Ridge, in order, by threatening Washington and Baltimore, to cause the enemy to withdraw from the south bank [of the Potomac River] where his presence endangered our communications. . . . Having accomplished this result, it was proposed to move the army into western Maryland, establish our communications with Richmond through the Valley of the Shenandoah, and, by threatening Pennsylvania, induce the enemy to follow, and thus draw him from his base of supplies.¹

From the pure military point of view, Lee's strategy was designed to pull the Federal army as far from its base at Washington as possible, and at some point, probably in Pennsylvania, give battle.² He recognized that his opponent was weak and demoralized, and that, at best, his reaction would be slow, giving Lee time: to assist Maryland in throwing off its yoke of oppression, collect vital

¹US Congress, House, The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of The Union and Confederate Armies, (cited hereafter as O.R.) 30th Congress, 1st Sess., 1887, Misc. Doc. No. 338, Series I, Vol. XIX, Part 1, p. 145.

²Douglas Southall Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, Vol. II (1951), p. 717.

supplies in an area untouched by war,³ detain the enemy in the northern frontier until the winter season would make military operations difficult⁴ and relieve his beloved Virginia of the presence of both armies.⁵

Lee's ragged, but jubilant and care-free army splashed across the Potomac, northwest of Washington, on 4 September, and rapidly concentrated around the small city of Frederick, Maryland. By the ninth of September Lee realized that the area had been drained of supplies, his army had been rested, and now it was time to move north. There was one problem, however, that dogged Lee and led him to one of the most fateful decisions of the war. It really had to do more with his ammunition supply than with anything else. "What occasions me most concern is the fear of getting out of ammunition"⁶ he had written to President Davis on the third of September. Shoes he could buy or do without; his soldiers could eat the produce of the field, but ammunition was vital. It was heavy and bulky, and could only be obtained in Richmond and laboriously shipped north to his depot in Winchester,⁷ and from there by wagon through Martinsburg or Harper's Ferry to the guns, wherever they

³O.K., Part II, pp. 590-591.

⁴O.R., Part I, p. 144.

⁵Freeman, p. 720.

⁶O.R., Part II, p. 591.

⁷O.R., Part I, p. 141.

may be. There was only one rub--Martinsburg and Harper's Ferry were occupied by the enemy. They must be eliminated if the Confederate Army was to fight a major engagement at all.

On the 9th of September General Lee issued Special Orders Number 191 (Appendix 1)--an order that has caused more historical comment, criticism and speculation than any order in history, as we shall see. It was not an order for the invasion of the north. It was not an order that was directed at the destruction of the major army of the enemy, nor was it an order that even, in itself, had any deep strategical significance. In the rather homespun words of Robert E. Lee, "I shall now open our communications with the valley, [Shenandoah] so that we can obtain more supplies."⁸ It was just that--an order to open communications and to ensure an adequate supply of ammunition. It was an order that took a calculated risk, based on Lee's assessment of McClellan, the Union commander--"he was an able but timid commander."⁹ Lee, in effect, had divided his army into six separate elements, designed to capture two strongpoints, which would impede his flow of supplies, and this in the face of an enemy he knew, full well, outnumbered him by a considerable degree. In doing so he calculated that by his temperament and previous behavior, McClellan would fail to react with sufficient speed to prevent the loss of the two posts and the combination of the Confederate

⁸O.R., Part II, p. 602.

⁹Freeman, p. 716.

Army at Boonsboro or Hagerstown.¹⁰

Early on the morning of the 10th, Lee's ragged army marched away from Frederick on the Hagerstown Road, led by Stonewall Jackson. Jackson, in compliance with his orders, branched off the main road in his sweep toward Martinsburg. McLaws and Walker encountered little initial difficulty, and made good progress toward their assigned objectives at Harper's Ferry. It was only Longstreet's command, accompanied by General Lee, which was to have its mission changed enroute. Two reports that reached Lee disturbed him. A Federal force was allegedly on its way to Hagerstown on the Chambersburg Road, and local citizens were removing large quantities of badly needed supplies from the town to Pennsylvania.¹¹ Longstreet was ordered to continue to Hagerstown, 13 miles further west, to correct the situation, and D. H. Hill, with the calvary of J. E. B. Stuart deployed to the east, was left alone to provide the rear guard of the army in the vicinity of Boonsboro.

By the 13th of September Lee's forces had made good progress. Jackson's troops were closing in on Harper's Ferry from the west, having driven the Federal troops in Martinsburg before him. McLaws was driving Union forces from Maryland Heights to the north, while Walker occupied Loudun Heights to the east. Longstreet's two divisions, with General Lee, still occupied Hagerstown. D. H. Hill had

¹⁰Douglas Southall Freeman, R. E. Lee, Vol. II (1949), pp. 359-360.

¹¹O.R., Part I, p. 145.

one brigade deployed at the vital South Mountain pass at Turner's Gap,¹² while the remainder of his division was deployed on the western slope watching the road that ran north from Harper's Ferry. Stuart's cavalry was engaged with Union cavalry, and by early afternoon with infantry, and was slowly withdrawing west under some pressure.¹³ To the eye, Lee had little to worry about, but was silently hoping, one could assume, that Jackson would reduce Harper's Ferry in short order.

General McClellan had assumed command of the defenses of Washington after the final debacle at Chantilly on 1 September. He had received numerous reports of the movement north of Lee's army, and while reorganizing units and replacing equipment, had gradually moved his army north out of the city of Washington. On the 11th of September McClellan had reported to the General-in-Chief, Halleck, "that almost the entire rebel army in Virginia amounting to not less than 120,000 men is in the vicinity of Frederick City."¹⁴ At 2000 hours on the same day, Brigadier General J. D. Cox reported that "the rebels in leaving Frederick are reported to have gone on the Hagerstown Road."¹⁵ More specific information was provided McClellan by Major D. C. Houston at 1030 that same morning. "Confederates left

¹²O.R., Part II, p. 170.

¹³John W. Schildt, September Edicts (1960), p. 23.

¹⁴O.R., Part II, p. 254.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 256-257.

Frederick with all but one division on the morning of the 10th-- that division is preparing to leave at 1 P.M."¹⁶ On the 12th of September McClellan reported to Halleck that "my columns are pushing on rapidly to Frederick. I feel perfectly confident that the enemy has abandoned Frederick moving in two directions, viz., on the Hagerstown and Harper's Ferry Roads."¹⁷ President Lincoln had advised him at 1745 of the same day "I have advices that Jackson is crossing the Potomac at Williamsport."¹⁸

In four days McClellan had marched no more than five and twenty miles; he had been unable to open communications with Harper's Ferry and he had moved with even more than his usual caution.¹⁹

His army had averaged six miles a day over good roads in beautiful fall weather.²⁰ By the night of the 13th, the IX Corps occupied Middletown, a few miles west of Frederick and the VI Corps was at Buckeystown. The I, II and XII Corps were in or near Frederick.²¹ (See map, Appendix 2) His army was well rested, its officers and men were in excellent spirits, and even though it lacked a fine

¹⁶Ibid., p. 257.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 270.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Col. G.F.R. Henderson, Stonewall Jackson and the American Civil War (1949), p. 504.

²⁰James V. Murfin, The Gleam of Bayonets (1970), pp. 129-130.

²¹O.R., Part I, p. 48.

cutting edge, it was a force that was ready to account for itself.²²

McClellan and his headquarters staff had even more reason to be jubilant and in good spirits, for an event had transpired that day that was to change the course of history. At noon the 12th Army Corps had arrived at Frederick. Over in the 27th Indiana Regiment bivouac area, the ground previously occupied by D. H. Hill's division of Lee's army, Private B. W. Mitchell stacked arms, shucked his rucksack and then spotted three cigars, with a sheet of paper wrapped around them, lying on the ground. It looked important, so it was promptly relayed to Colonel Colgrove, the regimental commander. In his amazed hands was Special Order 191 Army of Northern Virginia²³--Lee's entire plan of campaign.

Probably from about 2 P.M. McClellan had the authenticated paper in his own hands and could act in documented assurance of what the Confederate plans had been on September 9th. . . .²⁴

The only element he really lacked was the knowledge that Longstreet was in Hagerstown--the order specified Boonsboro. The significant factor at this moment was that the order in his hands reinforced what McClellan already knew, from the reports he had received, both from his subordinates and superiors. He was definitely aware that

²²Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, Campaigns in Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania, 1862-1863, Vol. III (1903), p. 47.

²³Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, (cited hereafter as B. & L.) Vol. II (1956), p. 603.

²⁴Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, pp. 173-174.

rebel forces had moved in the direction of Hagerstown, that Stuart's cavalry was in the vicinity of Middletown, that Jackson had headed south toward the Potomac and that Confederate forces were attacking Harper's Ferry and Martinsburg.

He was closer to the head and tail of Lee's army than the head and tail were to each other--and with Lee's orders on his desk McClellan knew all this, and Lee did not know that he knew it. The utter destruction of Lee's army was a definite possibility.²⁵

No one, of course, will ever know what thoughts ran through McClellan's mind that afternoon as opportunity persistently knocked on his door. We do know, to a great degree, what McClellan knew, and we also know some of the conclusions that affected his actions, as valuable minutes began to tick away.

The Union Commander was aware of the dispositions of Lee's entire force with the exception of Longstreet's two divisions, which he assumed to be in Boonsboro. He was aware that the weather on the 13th "was fine and the roads in good condition."²⁶ He knew that his troops were rested and in good spirits. He knew that any of the passes through South Mountain were of tremendous significance to the safety and security of Lee's army, and it was readily apparent that their seizure would offer him a marked advantage over his opponent. He knew that Harper's Ferry could not be defended for more than a day or two if the heights that surrounded them were in the

²⁵Bruce Catton, This Hallowed Ground (1956), p. 163.

²⁶Schildt, p. 22.

possession of an enemy force, which he knew to be the case.²⁷ He knew that his forward elements east of South Mountain were only in contact with cavalry forces, which could not offer serious and sustained resistance to determined infantry. He knew that he was only six hours away from the vital passes, assuming a very leisurely march and modest resistance from cavalry.²⁸

Knowing all this, and assuming even the slightest degree of competence for his ability as a soldier, McClellan must have concluded that time was of the essence if Harper's Ferry was to be saved, and Lee's army caught and engaged piecemeal before it recombined. His orders to General Franklin indicate his awareness of the need for speed when he stated: "I ask of you, at this important moment, all of your intellect and the utmost activity that a general can exercise."²⁹ At midnight on the 13th, he reported to President Lincoln that "the army is in motion as rapidly as possible."³⁰

To offset the obvious conclusion that speed was of the essence, was McClellan's estimate of Confederate forces opposing him. In the last analysis, and in spite of what McClellan reported, and probably believed, his conclusion that Lee was facing him with 120,000 men was to have more effect on his subsequent actions than any other

²⁷O.R., Part I, p. 26.

²⁸Henderson, p. 505.

²⁹O.R., Part I, p. 46.

³⁰O.R., Part II, p. 281.

factor. Not only did Lee's overall strength concern McClellan, but his abiding belief that Longstreet and D. H. Hill, together at South Mountain had 30,000 fighting men, in itself, introduced an element of partial paralysis in the Federal Commander. Believing this, as he did, one wonders what gave him the courage and the audacity to pit 30,000 of his own men against an equal number of battle-seasoned confederates, who occupied a position of great natural strength.³¹

The first response of the Federal Commander came with his orders to General Franklin, which were issued at 1820, directing him to move at daybreak the following morning through Crampton's Gap, with the ultimate mission of lifting the siege at Harper's Ferry.³² Federal headquarters was busy the remainder of the night preparing orders for a movement of all units of the army for early the following morning, with the main effort being made against Turner's Gap further to the north. The last order, to the artillery reserve, carried a date time of 140100 September. In essence, the time between 1400 on the 13th and daylight (approximately 0530) on the 14th was to be spent in planning and issuing orders. Not a single major unit was on the move.³³ Only one division of the

³¹Francis W. Palfrey, Antietam and Fredericksburg (undated), p. 39.

³²Warren W. Hassler, Jr., General George B. McClellan, Shield of the Union (1957), p. 561.

³³O.R., Part I, p. 48.

entire army made any meaningful move westward on the afternoon of the 13th--the Kanawha Division of the Ninth Corps. At about noon Major General Jacob D. Cox received orders to move from Frederick to Middletown, to support the cavalry reconnoitering to the west. On the evening of the 13th he was ordered to continue his supporting mission of the cavalry, which was to continue its reconnaissance the following morning in the direction of Turner's Gap.³⁴ The remainder of the Union Army turned in for a good night's rest.

During the late afternoon of the 13th, General Stuart reported through General D. H. Hill, the commander of the rear guard of the Confederate Army, that due to a heavy force of enemy infantry he had been forced to retire to South Mountain. Hill ordered Colquitt's Brigade to Turner's Gap to support the cavalry. Colquitt settled his troops into position, but it wasn't till darkness began to settle over the mountains that there seemed to be any cause for alarm. For it was then that the campfires of the enemy came into view, and they stretched farther and farther to the east as time went by. Hill, with some excitement, dispatched his intelligence to Lee at Hagerstown and at about midnight was ordered to hold the passes in cooperation with Stuart.³⁵

More alarming news reached Lee that night, and this, too, came from Stuart. It seems that a Southern sympathizer, who lived in

³⁴B. & L., pp. 584-585.

³⁵Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, Vol. II, p. 721.

Frederick, had discovered that McClellan had found a copy of Lee's order earlier that day. Riding hard to the west he had delivered the shattering news to Stuart, who, without losing any time, hastened a messenger west to Lee.

Longstreet was awakened in the middle of the night and ordered to move his two divisions east to South Mountain early the next morning. Lee finally had the answer to the riddle of McClellan's apparent energy on the afternoon of the 13th. His plans had been revealed at the very moment he was most vulnerable. The passes over South Mountain, which he had regarded with only passing interest previously, now assumed the importance of life and death.³⁶ At the moment he awakened Longstreet and ordered his movement east, the campaign changed complexion. Lee had become the victim of a strategic surprise, his initiative had been taken away, his plan for future offensive action into Pennsylvania had, at the very least, to be temporarily shelved. His objective was, at that point in time, defensive--designed to save his army.³⁷

It is not the purpose of this study to pursue the Antietam Campaign beyond this point in any detail. In the Battle of South Mountain, fought on the 14th of September, Lee's forces were finally, toward midnight, forced to abandon the strategic passes through the mountain and he selected Sharpsburg, further to the southwest, as his rallying point. McLaws, with the help of Stuart's cavalry,

³⁶Ibid., p. 173.

³⁷Frederick Tilberg, Antietam, p. 11.

delayed Franklin's Sixth Union Corps at Crampton's Gap until Jackson, Walker and his own troops forced the surrender of the United States forces at Harper's Ferry on the 15th of September. The Confederate divisions were then ordered to march at full speed to Sharpsburg, where Lee finally combined his army on the seventeenth of September.

McClellan slowly and deliberately followed Lee from South Mountain on the 15th and assembled his forces on the east side of Antietam Creek on the fifteenth. The sixteenth was a day of preparation and reconnaissance, and more lost opportunity. On the seventeenth, he delivered battle by attacking Lee in an uncoordinated series of maneuvers that Lee, in desperation, was able to fend off, until darkness brought an end to the bloodiest single day of the Civil War. The best that McClellan could do was to force a tactical stalemate, and the best that Lee could do was to merely survive. By the end of the day on the nineteenth of September, Lee's army was back in Virginia, and the Antietam Campaign was over.

There can be no doubt that the loss of Special Order 191 had a significant adverse effect on Lee's plans to invade the north, and to force McClellan into battle at a point of his own choosing, and at a distance from his base of communications. Lee stated that,

I do not know who lost the dispatch--I knew it was lost and the losing of it, with the fact that it fell into General McClellan's hands enabled him to discover my whereabouts; revealed to him in part my plans and caused

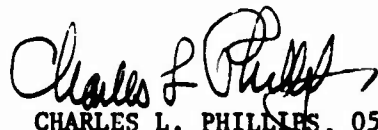
him so to act as to force a battle on me
before I was ready for it.³⁸

One can only idly speculate on what course of action McClellan would have taken had not the lost dispatch fallen into his hands at the time it did. If he had followed his policy of caution, as he displayed in earlier campaigns and certainly again during the first nine days of the Antietam Campaign, one can safely conclude that Lee would have accomplished his immediate purpose. For McClellan, the actions taken on the afternoon of the thirteenth and his mass movement early on the fourteenth were speed and action personified. In fairness to him, he did act too fast for the success of Lee's venture, and by so doing gained the strategic surprise that kept Lee constantly on the defensive, until he finally admitted his failure and recrossed the Potomac River.

Again, one can only speculate on opportunity lost, but the bald fact of the matter is, that seldom, if ever, in the history of war has fortune so smiled on one commander to the detriment of the other, only to have those smiles turned into wails of anguish over what might have been. The stakes of the game at South Mountain were really the destruction of, at the least, a major component of the Confederate Army. The deck was stacked against Lee, but his opponent would not call the play. Here was an army with exact information on its adversary, with good weather and good roads in its favor, with

³⁸Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, Vol. II, p. 717.

superior numbers of men and fighting equipment, an army well reaced and in good spirits, whose major elements were closer to the divided segments of its enemy than were those segments to each other. All that was needed was a march of six hours to place it in striking distance of the enemy, who was grossly unprepared. Faulty intelligence negated to a large degree the golden opportunity that so enticingly offered itself. Natural caution and procrastination contributed the rest. McClellan the soldier could only fit the mold of McClellan the man.



CHARLES L. PHILLIPS, 050-24-8037
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SPECIAL ORDERS,
No. 191.

HDQRS. ARMY OF NORTHERN VIRGINIA,
September 9, 1862.

I. The citizens of Fredericktown being unwilling, while over-run by members of this army, to open their stores, in order to give them confidence, and to secure to officers and men purchasing supplies for benefit of this command, all officers and men of this army are strictly prohibited from visiting Fredericktown except on business, in which case they will bear evidence of this in writing from division commanders. The provost marshal in Fredericktown will see that his guard rigidly enforces this order.

II. Major Taylor will proceed to Leesburg, Va., and arrange for transportation of the sick and those unable to walk to Winchester, securing the transportation of the country for this purpose. The route between this and Culpeper Court-House east of the mountains being unsafe will no longer be traveled. Those on the way to this army already across the river will move up promptly; all others will proceed to Winchester collectively and under command of officers, at which point, being the general depot of this army, its movements will be known and instructions given by commanding officer regulating further movements.

III. The army will resume its march tomorrow, taking the Hagerstown road. General Jackson's command will form the advance, and, after passing Middletown, with such portion as he may select, take the route toward Sharpsburg, cross the Potomac at the most convenient point, and by Friday morning take possession of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, capture such of them as may be at Martinsburg, and intercept such as may attempt to escape from Harper's Ferry.

IV. General Longstreet's command will pursue the main road as far as Boonsborough, where it will halt, with reserve, supply, and baggage trains of the army.

V. General McLaws, with his own division and that of General R. H. Anderson, will follow General Longstreet. On reaching Middletown will take the route to Harper's Ferry, and by Friday morning possess himself of the Maryland Heights and endeavor to capture the enemy at Harper's Ferry and vicinity.

VI. General Walker, with his division, after accomplishing the object in which he is now engaged, will cross the Potomac at Cheek's Ford, ascend its right bank to Lovettsville, take possession of Loudoun Heights, if practicable, by Friday morning, Kys' Ford on his left, and the road between the end of the mountain and the Potomac

Appendix 1

on his right. He will, as far as practicable, cooperate with Generals McLaws and Jackson, and intercept retreat of the enemy.

VII. General D. H. Hill's Division will form the rear guard of the army, pursuing the road taken by the main body. The reserve artillery, ordnance, and supply trains, &c, will precede General Hill.

VIII. General Stuart will detach a squadron of cavalry to accompany the commands of Generals Longstreet, Jackson, and McLaws, and, with the main body of the cavalry, will cover the route of the army, bringing up all stragglers that may have been left behind.

IX. The commands of Generals Jackson, McLaws, and Walker, after accomplishing the objects for which they have been detached, will join the main body of the army at Boonsborough or Hagerstown.

X. Each regiment on the march will habitually carry its axes in the regimental ordnance wagons, for use of the men at their encampments to procure wood, &c.

By Command of General R. E. Lee:

R. H. CHILTON,
Assistant Adjutant-General.³⁹

³⁹O.R., Part II, pp. 603-604.

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